

China's Cultural Revolution, Explained

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Fifty years ago, Mao Zedong unleashed the Cultural Revolution, a decade-long upheaval that had dramatic, often violent effects across China. Here is an overview of those tumultuous years:

What was the Cultural Revolution?

The movement was fundamentally about elite politics, as Mao tried to reassert control by setting radical youths against the Communist Party hierarchy. But it had widespread consequences at all levels of society. Young people battled Mao's perceived enemies, and one another, as Red Guards, before being sent to the countryside in the later stages of the Cultural Revolution. Intellectuals, people deemed "class enemies" and those with ties to the West or the former Nationalist government were persecuted. Many officials were purged. Some, like the future leader Deng Xiaoping, were eventually rehabilitated. Others were killed, committed suicide or were left permanently scarred. Some scholars contend that the trauma of the era contributed to economic transition in the decades that followed, as Chinese were willing to embrace market-oriented reforms to spur growth and ease deprivation.

When did it take place?

On May 16, 1966, the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee issued a circular that outlined Mao's ideas on the Cultural Revolution. But there were precursors in the months and years before that. The end is considered to be Mao's death on Sept. 9, 1976, and the subsequent arrest of the Gang of Four, a radical faction of four political leaders including Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, in October. Although the Cultural Revolution lasted a decade, much of the most extreme violence occurred in the first few years.

How did it begin?

The Cultural Revolution had roots in the 1958-61 Great Leap Forward, the collectivization of agricultural and industrial output that precipitated a famine that left as many as 45 million dead. Mao was blamed and partly sidelined by Communist Party leaders who pulled back some of the most extreme collectivization efforts.



Premier Zhou Enlai, left, and the defense minister, Lin Biao, right, with Chairman Mao Zedong, waving copies of the "Little Red Book" of Mao's sayings as they reviewed troops in Beijing in October 1967. Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

One of the key causes of the Cultural Revolution was a play, "The Dismissal of Hai Rui From Office," about a Ming dynasty official who criticized the emperor. Mao saw the play as attacking him and supporting Peng Dehuai, the defense minister, who was dismissed for pointing out the failures of the Great Leap Forward.

China's relations with the Soviet Union had grown increasingly tense, and Mao was worried about what the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956 and Khrushchev's removal from office in 1964 meant for himself as China's leader.

Who were the Red Guards?

Students who answered Mao's call for continuing revolution, Red Guards formed large groups that targeted political enemies for abuse and public humiliation. Sometimes the groups even battled one another. Under a campaign to wipe out the "Four Olds" — ideas, customs, culture, habits — they carried out widespread destruction of historical sites and cultural relics. As the Red Guards grew more extreme, the People's Liberation Army was sent in to control them.

Who were the 'sent-down youth'?

In the early years of the People's Republic, educated young people from the cities were sent to the countryside to work on farms. The movement accelerated during the Cultural Revolution, partly as a way to disperse the Red Guards. More than 16 million young people were sent to the countryside, including Xi Jinping, China's current president.

What was the toll?

During the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards targeted the authorities on campuses, then party officials and "class enemies" in society at large. They carried out mass killings in Beijing and other cities as the violence swept across the country. They also battled one another, sometimes with heavy weapons, such as in the city of Chongqing. The military joined the conflict, adding to the factional violence and killing of civilians. The pogroms even included cannibalization of victims in the southern region of Guangxi.

The exact number of dead is not known, but a figure of one million or more is most commonly cited. Estimates range from 500,000 to eight million dead, according to a 2011 paper by Song Yongyi, a scholar of the Cultural Revolution. The number of people persecuted is usually estimated in the tens of millions.

The chaos of the period, mass relocations and the closing of schools are believed to have sharply curbed economic output.

Who were the major participants?

Mao Zedong, the founder of the People's Republic of China and chairman of the Communist Party, is the key figure. The Cultural Revolution began at his behest, and factions battled in his name. He called on Red Guards to "bombard the headquarters," which was seen to mean other top leaders like Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping.

Liu Shaoqi, China's president, relaxed collectivization to undo some of the damage of the Great Leap Forward and became the leading target of Cultural Revolution attacks. He died in custody in 1969, after two years of abuse and denial of medical treatment.

Zhou Enlai, the second-most senior leader, managed to survive by showing loyalty to Mao. Many in China credit him for curbing the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, but he could act on important matters only with Mao's approval. His death from cancer in 1976 touched off protests and widespread mourning.

Jiang Qing, a former actress, was able, as Mao's wife, to claim authority during the Cultural Revolution, particularly over the arts. She was the leading figure of the Gang of Four, radicals who reached the peak of political power during the Cultural Revolution. She was arrested after Mao's death and committed suicide in 1991.

Lin Biao was the leader of the People's Liberation Army and played a crucial role in promoting the cult of Mao, including ordering the compilation of the "Little Red Book" of the chairman's sayings. Lin was designated Mao's successor, but died in 1971 when his plane crashed in Mongolia. He was apparently trying to flee after learning that Mao was turning against him, but the circumstances of his death remain unclear.

Deng Xiaoping was a People's Liberation Army veteran and leader who was twice purged during the Cultural Revolution. He returned to power after Mao's death, pushing drastic economic reforms in the next decade.